

Friday, June 18, 2010

## A Response to David Smart on Arrogance

As some of my readers may already know, David Smart has posted a reply to my blog entry [Is Atheism Inherently Arrogant?](#) Smart's blog can be found [here](#).

Smart begins by announcing to the world his own lethargy as the cause for not usually reading my blog:

Usually I don't bother paying any attention to The Bahnsen Burner, a blog run by an Atheist named Dawson Bethrick, and it would take less than five minutes at his site for a person to see why. It has almost nothing to do with the actual merits of his arguments and everything to do with the fact that locating and identifying an argument within his landslide *argumentum verbosium* is just too laborious a task.

I've never heard of "argumentum verbosium" before, though coming from a tradition promoted by the likes of Cornelius Van Til and Greg Bahnsen, it's hard to see how Smart could genuinely have any problem with this. But it's true, my work does require some attention span on the part of my readers. I write because I have something to say, and I have a lot to say about religion and its defenses. Also, I take great pleasure in developing my arguments, leading readers step by step from my initial premises to my grand conclusions. I'm the type who seeks to do the best that he can, and to find my arguments, one needs only to read my writings. But this amounts to too much heavy labor for those who prefer the immediate gratification of soundbites and slogans (like excised bible verses) as opposed to developed argumentation.

In general, we should not be surprised when theistic apologists find that they have no time for in-depth analyses of Christian defenses. After all, theistic apologists are interested in sustaining the pretense that their defenses are unchallengeable. Thus apologists have a built-in motivation to avoid exposing themselves to critiques of apologetic arguments. It's "just too laborious a task" to unravel the avalanche of hard-hitting points that he may encounter on sites like [Incinerating Presuppositionalism](#). So to play it safe, Smart chooses not to examine my blog entries.

Smart says that he

share[s] the same view as Joshua Whipps over at [Choosing Hats](#): until Bethrick decides to express arguments or criticisms with succinct perspicuity instead of proof-by-verbosity, I simply can't be bothered to engage his material. It requires more time than I have available.

By "proof-by-verbosity" Smart means

"Proof by verbosity" is a rhetorical sophistry whereby someone publishes a very long-winded and complex argument that overwhelms interlocutors and readers with such a volume of material that the argument sounds plausible, appears to be well-researched, and is so laborious to untangle and check that the argument is allowed to slide by unchallenged.

For a moment there, I thought Smart might have had Bahnsen's hefty *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis* in mind. Weighing in at no less than 733 pages (not including bibliography and indices), Bahnsen's book contains page after page of repetitious insistence that the Christian god is the necessary precondition of knowledge, logic, morality, science, etc. To find an argument, one must be prepared to do a lot of hunting in this door-stop of a tome.

Frankly, it's hard not to see Smart's statement here as mere excuse-making for choosing not to interact with explicit criticisms of presuppositionalism. The impression that Smart apparently desires his readers to walk away with is that it's somehow my fault that he does not address my critiques. I'm so "very long-winded," my arguments are so "complex," my writing so "overwhelms interlocutors and readers" with argument which "sounds plausible" and "appears to be well-researched," that it's acceptable to allow my arguments "to slide by unchallenged."

Smart mentions Joshua Whipps. Like Smart, Whipps likes to publish under a video game moniker, namely "RazorsKiss." Readers of my blog may remember my nine-part series examining Whipps' debate with Mitch LeBlanc in which the presuppositional swashbuckler sought to defend the claim that the Christian god is the basis of knowledge (see [here](#)). Once I was finished with my analysis of Whipps' case, I sent him links to my work. To my knowledge, Whipps' only response was the following statement:

Dawson,

While you are quite impressively verbose - I think that the casual reader, upon examination of your mountains of verbiage inspired by this debate will be singularly unimpressed. In fact, it reminded me most strikingly of exactly what my position was. In any position not grounded in the Triune God of Scripture, logical thought just doesn't happen properly. ([Debate Transcript](#))

Of course, Whipps would be in error if he's thinking that my target audience is "the casual reader" - i.e., the type who prefers Stephen King novels, tabloid magazines, comic books and the astrology pages. I would not expect such readers to spend the time reading my work, let alone be "impressed." Casual readers typically do not go out of their way to read essays. As for an example of logical thought "just happening," perhaps we're supposed to find it in Whipps' own writings. I have yet to find it.

Where Smart is most in error here is in giving his readers the impression (with expressions like "proof by verbosity") that I use volume of verbiage rather than soundness of argument to establish my verdicts. It is not the case that I do this. Anyone who reads my blog entries should see that I seek to address the issues that occupy my attention thoroughly and comprehensively. I am a natural teacher in this sense: I enjoy taking the time to fully explain my criticisms of Christianity, because I think what I have to say is important. It's certainly important to me. If it's not important to someone else, that does not diminish its importance in my hierarchy of values. It may be that Smart is a poor learner, and thus does not appreciate the effort I put forward in defending my verdicts. But many do. I am constantly receiving message in my e-mail from readers thanking me for my work, a product I labor on and publish free of charge. If Smart has better things to do with his time than to read my blog, that's fine. But this choice does not justify the charge that I seek to overwhelm opponents with "landslide *argumentum verbosium*" and bury them under a debris field of words.

Smart stated:

The only reason that I am even aware Bethrick had recently tackled my "Arrogance of Atheism" articles is because one of our staff members, Mathew Hamilton, directed me to it. I would have otherwise never known. And so for Hamilton's sake alone I have reviewed Bethrick's piece, shouldering the laborious task of locating and identifying his arguments in order to respond to them. I shall not repeat this endeavour (even though Bethrick will probably be unable to resist carving out an entertaining albeit verbose Chewbacca Defense), as this response will suffice to demonstrate that there is nothing new under the sun when it comes to the bankruptcy of Atheist objections.

What Smart wants everyone to know is that the [Aristophrenium](#) blog has a "staff." What does a blog need a "staff" for? Are these paid employees? Are they appointed officials? The idea that a blog like Aristophrenium has a "staff" strikes me as utterly pretentious. What do these staffers do? Apparently some of the time they're out on the prowl, looking out for mentions of Aristophrenium on other blog sites. Smart also wants us to know that he did not come and visit my blog and become aware of my response to him on his own. Instead, he has a staffer who found it and reported it back to him. I guess I'm simply too self-reliant to need a "staff" of fellow contributors. The only "staff" I have is a big stick by the door to keep out the rascals. I haven't had to use it yet.

Smart also indicates that he thinks his "response will suffice that there is nothing new under the sun when it comes to the bankruptcy of Atheist objections." Clearly he wants his readers to be confident that what Smart has to say in response to me is enough to put a capper on the discussion. It is his choice if he does not choose to pursue the matter. But that allows me to have the last word. Let's see if he remains true to his promises.

Smart wrote the following paragraph in italics, so I guess he did this because he thought it was something important he wanted to say to me directly:

*And no, Bethrick, our staff will not publish your loquacious tomes in the Comments field to this (or any other) article. Comments must be composed with succinct perspicuity. If you want to do a verbal dump, there is always The Bahnsen Burner—where no one has to see it unless they masochistically want to. I will return to ignoring you, although you are free to continue directing traffic here by writing about our articles.*

Smart is no doubt referring to his blog's tight moderation policies governing comments (they want to screen comments in response to their blog entries before allowing them to be published) and earlier attempts of mine to publish comments on [Aristophrenium](#) that were censored. This is a common practice on Christian blogs. In spite of their constant calls for

debate, debate seems to be the one thing Christian apologists are least prepared for, and their comments policies (among other things) confirm this.

Smart again mentions “succinct perspicuity,” but what are the criteria defining this? They are not laid out in his blog’s [comments policies](#). Perhaps it’s one of those “we’ll let you know” kind of things. That’s fine. I have no interest in stooping to meet arbitrary guidelines (and they are arbitrary until they’re stated). And Smart is correct: I have my own blog, and anyone is free to read or ignore my blogs at their will. I’m sure that Mathew Hamilton, a member of the Aristophrenium “staff,” takes comfort in a fellow staffer insinuating that he has masochistic desires by coming over to my blog and reading one of its entries.

As for directing traffic to [Aristophrenium](#), I’m more than happy to do so. In fact, not only have I made sure to include links to Smart’s blog in my own entries, I’ve also added a permanent link to [Aristophrenium](#) from my blog’s main page, on the side bar. Something tells me that this will not be reciprocated. (Smart does not even link back to my article when he discusses it, which doesn’t seem very beneficial to his readers.)

## The Straw Man Charge

One of Smart’s more frequently used stock in trade reply to critics is that they are rebutting something other than the argument he has presented. Of course, this accusation presupposes that Smart has presented an argument in the first place.

Smart wrote:

Although Bethrick claims to value the capacity for distinguishing the real world from an imagined one, he nevertheless demonstrates an ironic quixotism in his sophisticated and eloquent attempt at rebutting my piece on the arrogance of Atheism. He takes my argument and builds a straw-filled caricature of it before launching into his rebuttal. For some reason this imagined argument is preferable to the real one; but then if you examine the real argument I presented and compare it to his pretend version, maybe you could see why he made that choice.

I have to admit, I do not recall finding anywhere in Smart’s blog entries (see [here](#) and [here](#)) where he laid out an argument which concluded “therefore, the Atheist is arrogant.” I did not find a developed inference for this conclusion. In fact, given the titles of his blogs ([The Arrogance of Atheism](#) and [The \(Ongoing\) Arrogance of Atheism](#)), Smart seems to be saying that *atheism* is arrogant, while in his papers he’s implying that the alleged arrogance in question is occasioned by certain actions made by individual atheists. So he seems not to be sure exactly what he wants to say.

Perhaps Smart did not express his argument with “succinct perspicuity,” and thus in attempting to interpret his argument from the under-developed argument that he supposedly did give is prone to resulting in what Smart considers a misrepresentation of his position. Of course, one could safeguard his position against mischaracterization on the part of his opponents by clearly laying out the premises and intended conclusion of the argument he has in mind. But I do not find that Smart has done this.

Also, since it is not clear how I have allegedly misrepresented Smart’s original argument, it is not clear how the points of his against which I reacted are the result of my own imagining and “preferable to the real” argument which Smart seems to think he presented. In presenting Smart’s position, I quoted Smart’s own statements in order to ensure that his position was stated in his own words. If restating Smart’s own words is not sufficient to maintain the integrity of the position he’s arguing for, what would be?

Smart notes that:

It seems the capacity to distinguish the real from the imagined doesn’t necessarily mean the person will prefer the real.

This is true: just because a person can distinguish reality from imagination, it does not always mean that he will. What he needs is a worldview which not only provides an objective basis for distinguishing between the two (and what else could do this but a worldview rooted explicitly and consistently on the primacy of existence?), but also informs a system of values which guides one in choosing the real over the imaginary (such as the Objectivist ethics). Christianity surely

does not affirm the primacy of existence as a guiding principle (if theists think I'm wrong here, they could start by pointing to chapter and verse where the bible does this).

Bethrick pretends that the arrogance is found in the Atheist presupposing the truth of his system of thought and expecting the Christian to work within the framework of that system, and then turns to wonder why it is not arrogant when the Christian does the very same thing.

Smart accuses me of pretending here, but where does he quote my own words and show that I am pretending? He doesn't. That's because I'm not pretending at all anywhere in my blog. On the contrary, I quoted Smart verbatim, stating his "argument" just as he presented it in his blog entry.

Also, it's important to note what I really stated, so that the gist of my point is not lost in Smart's confusion. Smart specifically explained that the "arrogance" of atheism is in play when the atheist "presuppose[s] the truth of his system of thought and expect[s] the Christian to work within the framework of that system," and then stated that "this criticism applies only to those Atheist *responses* which deny for the Christian the very principle the Atheist allows for himself."

It is because Smart says that his criticism "applies *only* to those Atheist *responses*..." that I inferred him to be saying that his criticism does not apply to Christian responses which do essentially the same thing. The way Smart's "argument" reads, it's arrogant when the atheist does this, but not when the Christian does this. Smart has not corrected this by saying something to the effect of, "yeah, it would be arrogant if the Christian did essentially the same thing." Instead, he simply accuses me of straw-manning his argument, which he did not lay out with "succinct perspicuity." Indeed, that's what Smart himself is telling us when quoting his own statements results in misrepresentation.

In response to my point, Smart exclaims:

Of course, that's not even close to what my argument said.

Perhaps what Smart's "argument said" and what Smart himself wrote are distinct from one another. I quoted Smart's very words, which were explicitly exclusionary in nature ("this criticism applies *only* to those Atheist *responses*..."). If what Smart presented was not his argument, then he must be holding it close to his chest for some reason. I'm reacting to what Smart wrote, whether or not it was his intended argument.

Smart then tried to clarify his argument, perhaps for the record:

The "arrogance of atheism" is manifest by those Atheists who presuppose the truth of their system of thought and expect the Christian to work within the framework of that system, all the while denying for the Christian the inverse thereof because the only presuppositions the Atheist permits in the field of debate are his own. Again, the issue is not about Atheists insisting that theistic claims be supported, but rather how they insist those claims get supported.

But notice that in his blog entry, Smart stated that his "this criticism applies only to those Atheist *responses* which *deny* for the Christian the very principle the Atheist allows for himself." But I think I was very clear on this in my [original response to Smart](#): I for one do not deny for the Christian the very principle which I allow for myself. That principle is the recognition of the fact that there is a fundamental distinction between what is real and what is merely imaginary. Indeed, I would expect all adult thinkers to recognize and observe this distinction in their world view. So if the arrogance is occasioned in "denying" for the Christian the very principle which I allow for myself, what principle am I allowing for myself that I'm denying for the Christian? Blank out.

Now Smart says that the "arrogance of atheism" is "manifest by those Atheists who presuppose the truth of that system of thought and expect the Christian to work within the framework of that system," but this seems to be the reverse of what he had earlier characterized as the essence of the "arrogance of atheism." Where before an atheist is being arrogant if he *denies* for the Christian the very principle which he allows for himself (for instance, in my case, the principle which explicitly recognizes that there is a fundamental distinction between the real and the imaginary), now the arrogance is occasioned if I expect the Christian to "work within the framework of that system" which is premised upon this principle. Translated, Smart's claim seems to be that I'm arrogant for denying the Christian this principle, and also for expecting him to abide by it.

Smart follows this up with the added criterion of having this expectation “while denying for the Christian the inverse thereof because the only presuppositions the Atheist permits in the field of debate are his own.” But if the principle in question is the explicit recognition that there is a fundamental distinction between the real and the imaginary, as I pointed out in [my original response to Smart](#), what’s the problem? Smart himself stated “both Bethrick and I recognize that some things are real and other things are imaginary,” so if Smart recognizes this distinction, why is it “arrogant” for me to expect him to observe this principle in his theistic defenses? We will find below why Smart’s own handling of this matter is itself entirely inadmissible on the very grounds that there is a fundamental distinction between the real and the imaginary.

Smart continues, stating:

Where the Atheist errs is when he demands that Christians support their view using the presuppositions and epistemological criteria of the Atheist’s world view, an error that is readily apparent if the Atheist gave it a moment’s thought: he should consider trying to support his world view using the presuppositions and epistemological criteria of the Christian world view (e.g., the normative role of Scriptures in both metaphysics and epistemology). “But such a system inherently precludes an atheistic world view,” he might protest. Indeed, and so perhaps the point begins to sink in? We can hope.

While I have heard of Christian atheists, it appears that Smart believes that theism is the only interpretation possible if one builds on “the normative role of Scriptures in both metaphysics and epistemology.” But this misses the essence of the point which I raised. My point was that, since the Christian worldview is ultimately premised on the primacy of consciousness (which I have shown repeatedly in the writings of my blog), the essential principle governing the Christian worldview is certainly more fundamental than the notion that the “Scriptures” have some normative role in metaphysics and epistemology. The notions of “Scriptures” and “normativity” in both metaphysics and epistemology are not irreducible; whatever one’s position on either matter stems from the orientation assumed between subject and object, i.e., the issue of metaphysical primacy. One could not suppose that the Christian bible, for instance, had any valid significance in metaphysics and epistemology if one did not *first* accept - even if only implicitly - the primacy of consciousness. Likewise, if one accepts and maintains fidelity to the primacy of existence, he would never come to the conclusion that the bible has anything worthwhile to say on either metaphysics or epistemology. Theists accept the primacy of consciousness before they accept the “Scriptures” as their guide in life, both logically and chronologically.

### **Epistemological Indecency: Presupposing the Imaginary is Real**

Smart wrote:

Bethrick himself might object on a slightly different point: “But the Christian’s system of thought allows for an imaginary X as if it were real,” forgetting that X is imaginary *only by the presuppositions and criteria he employs!*

Smart alleges that I have “forgotten” that “X is imaginary *only*” on the basis of those “presuppositions and criteria” which I employ. But I haven’t “forgotten” this. I *reject* this claim. And I reject it because it’s patently not true, as I shall explain.

First notice that Smart does not provide an argument for the supposition underlying his allegation against me, namely that something is imaginary *only if* certain “presuppositions and criteria” are employed. This is clearly false: if something is imaginary, it is imaginary *regardless* of what “presuppositions and criteria” one may happen to use. That’s what the primacy of existence tells us: the imaginary does not become real simply because one adopts those “presuppositions and criteria” according to which one *believes* it is real. If something is imaginary, it’s imaginary whether or not anyone thinks, feels, wishes, worries or presupposes that it is otherwise. One’s conscious attitudes do not have the power to turn the imaginary into reality. The reason why Smart thinks that something is either real or imaginary depending on the “presuppositions and criteria” one employs, is because his worldview systematically *blurs* the distinction between the real and the imaginary. It accomplishes this by cultivating an image of fear in the mind of the believer that, once it’s taken root, is very difficult to shake. Once its unstated premises are accepted, this fear becomes the believer’s epistemological starting point. As Proverbs 1:7 puts it with the kind of “succinct perspicuity” which Smart himself should admire, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge.” An emotional reaction is the foundation of the believer’s knowledge.

Smart's point here clearly shows that he assumes the primacy of consciousness without realizing it. The primacy of consciousness is so taken for granted that it goes without saying, lurking at the lowest strata of his thought process, well below the radar of his own presuppositional detection skills. Smart takes it as self-evident that one's beliefs essentially *shape* reality, that something is either real or imaginary depending on what assumptions lie at the basis of his view of the world. In other words, *the contents of one consciousness determine whether or not something is either real or imaginary*. There is no *objective* way to validate what is essentially a subjective premise: the view that reality conforms to one's conscious intentions, just as it is supposed to do in the case of the Christian god's desires and commands.

So it should not come as a surprise that Smart does not provide an argument to support his view that "X is imaginary *only by the presuppositions and criteria [one] employs*." There is certainly no *good* argument for supposing this, for a good argument must at minimum cohere with the primacy of existence, the very principle which Smart's presupposition seeks to thwart.

That Smart takes the primacy of consciousness for granted is evident in his projection that I have "forgotten" to apply it in my analysis. But that's one of the chief points that I was drawing attention to in my [initial reply to Smart](#): I reject the primacy of consciousness, the ground-level premise of the Christian worldview.

Smart sought to make a clarification:

The issue is not about distinguishing between the real and the imaginary—both Bethrick and I recognize that some things are real and other things are imaginary, after all—but about the criteria employed in making that distinction.

Smart affirms that he distinguishes between the real and the imaginary. I'm sure he does. That's why I had written:

Theists observe the fundamental distinction between what is real and what they imagine in so many areas of their lives, such as when they get out of bed in the morning, consume breakfast cereal, dress themselves, drive their vehicles to work (if they work), tally their monthly bills, balance their bank accounts, walk across their yard, etc.

The problem is that theists do not observe the distinction between the real and the imaginary *consistently*, as a matter of *principle*. For when it comes to their religious fictions, they think that what they can *only* imagine (e.g., "God") is real. This is endemic to the theistic worldview. The teachings of the bible, for instance, do not provide believers with any stable guide for distinguishing the real from the imaginary, and in fact never explain what lies at the root of that distinction. In places where imagination is mentioned, the fact that there is a distinction between reality and imagination is certainly assumed (primarily on the part of the reader), but it is never explored or explained, so that the believer does not get a full understanding of this distinction as a fundamental of his worldview. And as I have already noted (see [here](#)), there are many good reasons to suppose that Christian god-belief has an imaginative basis.

Unfortunately for their own faith commitments, when believers do affirm that the imaginary is not real, they are in fact *borrowing* from a non-Christian worldview, one which explicitly recognizes the fact that the imaginary is not real and which contextually supports that understanding by grounding it in the primacy of existence. The bible does not make an issue of this, nor does it make any explicit statements on the issue of metaphysical primacy (the relationship between the subject of consciousness and its objects). Furthermore, if Smart or any other Christian thinks the bible does address this matter, I'd invite them to show us where it does. Above we've already seen how implicitly Smart takes the primacy of consciousness for granted in his own rationalizations.

Since Smart raised the issue of "the criteria employed in making that distinction" in his blog [Arrogance of Atheism: Dawson Bethrick](#), one of Smart's readers who posts under the moniker Tavarish, asked the following question:

How do you decide what is real and what is not?

Smart's response to this was if anything evasive:

Neither Bethrick's article nor mine stated the method by which we distinguish fact from fantasy—because that's simply not relevant to the question at hand. Against his polemic sophistry in stating that he makes such distinctions, I pointed out that Christians do so likewise and then redirected attention back to the question at

hand: the arrogance of atheists who shove their beliefs down other people's throats (e.g., when they fault a Christian for affirming some imaginary X, it is 'imaginary' only by the presuppositions and criteria they employ, which their claim merely begs against the Christian).

To date, Smart has not addressed this question. Rather, Smart is more interested in charging "arrogance" against atheists "who shove their beliefs down other people's throats." Below I will identify a few reasons for supposing that Christians are far more arrogant than any atheist given the measuring stick that Smart uses in identifying instances of arrogance.

It is also noteworthy that, in his response to Tavarish, Smart re-affirms the view that something is "'imaginary' only by the presuppositions and criteria" which one happens to employ, not because something actually is imaginary. Smart clearly thinks that whether or not something is imaginary depends on what someone might happen to think, not on whether or not something is *in fact* imaginary. So the analysis of Smart's statements that I give above is not mistaken.

In the main entry of his blog, Smart stated:

Under both his view and mine, some things are just not real, while other things plainly are real. How do we decide? There's the rub—which so many Atheists, like Bethrick here, simply will not grasp.

Smart is apparently saying that I do not grasp how one can distinguish between what is real and what is merely imaginary, but provides no support for this wholly untrue allegation. Either that, or he's trying to say that I do not appreciate the differences between the Christian worldview and Objectivism on the matter. But I do. In fact, I have made it a centerpiece in my critique of Christianity. I invite Smart to answer the [numerous reasons](#) that I give for inferring that the Christian god is imaginary. So far, neither Smart nor any other Christian has addressed these concerns.

Again, notice that Smart gives no indication of the process which Christianity might recommend (if it did recommend one) for distinguishing between the real and the imaginary. No doubt, if called to do so, Christians would appeal to their god. In the context of a debate such as this, this would simply beg the question: it would assume the reality of one of the very things in question. A Muslim could likewise appeal to Allah as providing the guide for distinguishing between what is real and what is imaginary. I could appeal to Blarke, which I know is imaginary. Appealing to some invisible magic being only presents itself as a case in point.

So our curiosity as to how Smart would recommend an individual on the issue of reliably distinguishing between what is real and what is imaginary, remains unquenched.

## The Arrogance of Christianity

If shoving one's beliefs down other people's throats is a mark of arrogance, which is the very measuring stick that Smart employs in determining whether or not atheists are arrogant, then Christianity takes the Grand Prize here. Atheists do not cram people into auditoria from birth through adulthood every Sunday to preach at them, terrorize them with fantasies of eternal peril, shame them with displays of public humiliation and coerce them by means of a community of surveillance. This is a Christian institution, known as "the church," and without this instrument of aggressive propagandizing, how would Christianity have survived? Atheists aren't the ones who stand on street corners shouting out bible verses to passers-by, telling them they'll be condemned for all eternity if they don't "submit," or come to people's homes and knock on their doors to tell them about the "good news" of a father who stood by while his son was tortured and crucified. I've never had an atheist come knocking on my door and tell me that the bible is bunk. Quite the opposite has taken place, and many a bible-thumper have tried this (though they tend to quickly leave after I've had a chance to ask a few questions, such as how one call a father "loving" when he stands by while his son is being tortured and crucified).

So if shoving beliefs down other people's throats is the metric by which Smart measures arrogance, how could he at all be complaining about atheists? Smart may want to consider the words attributed to his own savior in Matthew 7:3:

Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?

Or is it simply too difficult for Smart to resist ignoring Christianity's built-in arrogance while straining at the arrogance

he projects onto non-believers and their consistency in their non-belief? Believers are encouraged by their worldview to be actively engaged in across-the-board evangelism, seeking new recruits (cf. Mk. 16:15) and ensuring that one's children grow up in the faith (Pr. 22:6). If that's not a form of shoving beliefs down people's throats, I don't see how Smart could find atheists guilty of arrogance by doing what he finds apologetically inconvenient. In all seriousness, Smart's charge of arrogance against atheists is analogous to a fleet of oil tankers condemning an inflatable life-preserver for displacing too much water.

## The Two-Camps Diversion

It is common for those who find a need to ignore the 800 lb. gorilla in the middle of the room to draw attention to non-essentials, hoping that the big hairy beast isn't noticed. To ensure that we don't notice the built-in arrogance of Christianity's insatiable hunger for converts, Smart puts the spotlight on what in his mind distinguishes two major apologetic methods, a non-essential if there ever were one:

When it comes to Christian apologetics, there are basically two camps: on the one hand is evidentialism, and presuppositionalism on the other. *Please notice that neither of these two systems deny the Atheist his presuppositions and epistemological criteria!* (To charge either with the arrogance I speak of requires ignoring the facts.)

This of course suggests that arrogance can only be occasioned if one disallows his opponent from using the "presuppositions and epistemological criteria" of his own system. I would suggest that we not accept this assumption quite so readily. This is not even Smart's own measuring stick. Smart himself attributes arrogance to the practice of shoving one's beliefs down someone else's throats.

Moreover, it's hard to see how one could disallow someone from employing the method of his own system. A Christian apologist may appeal to the bible as "evidence" supporting his claims, and his atheist opponent may cite this as invalid, fallacious or inadequate to the task. But his doing so does not disallow the theist from using his criteria of choice. Nor is it an instance of forcibly "shov[ing] their beliefs down other people's throats" (as Smart [puts it](#)). Again, it seems to fall short of Smart's own measuring stick.

What is important to note is the fact that, even if the atheist finds fault with the theist's criteria, *this does not prevent the theist from using it*. Indeed, how often do Christian apologists continue to rely on the same arguments after they've been soundly defeated?

Take for example Christian apologist Chris Bolt. On the issue of induction, I have proven not only that Christianity fails to provide an "account for" inductive generalization, but also that Christianity undermines inductive reasoning while showing how Objectivism provides an objective basis for induction (see [here](#)). Bolt has not answered any of my points on this matter, and yet he still continues to claim that Christianity is the only worldview which "accounts for" induction. By showing that his criteria are false and even counter-productive to the task for which they are presented, have I disallowed Bolt from continuing to use those criteria? Obviously not. Bolt can still do what he chooses, even if that means relying on refuted premises. If apologists want debates, and then after having debates in which their arguments have been defeated, they still continue attempting to pass off those arguments as sound arguments, isn't that at least a little arrogant? They're essentially telling us by their actions that they're above the facts, that they're above reason and logic, that they're above truth. How is that not arrogant?

Indeed, one could reasonably say that atheists often do precisely what Smart claims his apologetic methods do: invite the believer to employ his criteria in the (rather unchallenging) task of showing that those criteria are self-defeating. The atheist is under no obligation to accept the believer's criteria; and, as we've seen, by not accepting those criteria the atheist is not denying the theist from being able to use them; theists tend to use them again and again, well after they've been shown to be untenable.

Moreover, when I've engaged believers in debate (those few who have sought to challenge my position), I do not stipulate that they must use my criteria and only my criteria. I simply point out that they are already using my criteria in many areas of their life and that their theistic beliefs and arguments are inconsistent with what they implicitly already know to be true. Typically it is theists who seek to control the debate, setting guidelines and minimum requirements (such as Smart's "succinct perspicuity"), and often flee debate once it's underway for unexplained reasons.



As we saw above, the implicit arrogance of theism is built-in, even before one gets to apologetic defenses. The arrogance of theism is rooted in its inherent parasitical infatuation with the unearned, both spiritual and epistemological. The Christian claims to have a knowledge which he has not earned, a salvation which he acknowledges cannot be earned, a divine favor which no one could earn, and a position of superiority which is unearned. It is from this artificial self-inflation that the believer is encouraged to look down on others, endeavoring however selectively to conceal the condescending attitude behind a feigned euphoric calm that is intended to give the impression of a “peace... which passeth all understanding” (Phil. 4:7). Some pull it off better than others. The deep-seated insecurity fostered by a faked sense of self-worth creates in the believer an insatiable need to live in the minds of others, like a shmoo that senses its own character deficiencies and seeks to absorb its content from those closest in proximity. It never works so it never satisfies, while producing the effect of feeding a hunger that can never be sated. And it can never be sated because it is premised on the desire to control others, and there will always be others who are not under one’s control.

It is in apologetics where theists put their arrogance on display, holding in contempt those who dare to defy the imaginary deity which they enshrine in their carefully managed imaginations. The arrogance in this context is expressed in the presumption that merely believing in a deity grants one the privilege of compelling other human beings to submit, and condemning those who do not submit and obey, all the while pretending that the condemnation issues from a supernatural source.

Also, don’t forget that theistic apologists appoint themselves as the authoritative spokesmen for the creator and ruler of the universe. They posture themselves as “knowing the will of God” and enjoying the position of being able to speak for it. What could be more arrogant than this?

Indeed, it seems hard for David Smart to contain his own arrogance. On explaining the meaning of his blog’s name, “*Aristophrenium*,” Smart makes the following statement (I take it that Smart wrote this statement himself):

The term was coined by Ryft [i.e., David Smart himself] from an archaic word ‘aristophrenia’, which describes the condition of having a superior intellect (Chris Aldrich, *The Aldrich Dictionary of Phobias and Other Word Families*, p. 236). Ryft coined the term ‘aristophrenium’ to describe an arena where thoughtful and intelligent ideas can be shared and critically engaged, far above the clamor of superficial rhetoric and inane caricatures. (The *Aristophrenium*’s [About page](#))

Clearly Smart must think he possesses “a superior intellect,” no doubt superior to all the rest of us thinking mortals (otherwise we’d all be believers too, and invited to be part of the “staff” at [Aristophrenium](#)).

### Smart’s Arbitrary Nitpicking

Smart wrote:

“If I may make a few observations,” Bethrick said, “let me state the following.” It was ironic, then, to notice that what followed did not contain one single observation. *Not a single one*. He issued a long series of vituperative assertions about the motivations and feelings of the theist, informed by nothing but Bethrick’s own prejudices. He presumes to disclose “the real cause” behind my “choice to accuse an atheist of arrogance,” which he so charitably identifies as “a deep-seated resentment of the atheist’s certainty,” that I envy the Atheist who knows that God is nothing more than “a frightening concoction of the imagination”—and on and on. “The real agenda behind the charge of arrogance is much simpler,” he suspects. “It is to smear and discredit non-believers.” The reader might note that there is *not one single observation contained in any of this*.

Apparently Smart would prefer to quibble over what constitutes an observation than to explore the issue of how the distinction between the real and the imaginary can be objectively grasped. I think this says a lot, particularly about Smart.

Here is what I stated:

I’ve often suspected that the real cause behind a theist’s choice to accuse an atheist of arrogance stems from a deep-seated resentment of the atheist’s *certainty*, whether the atheist really is certain or the theist simply imagines that he is. The atheist should bear in mind the fact that he is essentially a spoilsport for the theist,

and that his mere existence as an atheist serves as a constant reminder to believers that not everyone on “God’s green earth” has obsequiously surrendered his mind to a frightening concoction of the imagination, and this spawns a sense of private envy in the mind of the believer: he wishes that he had the spiritual courage that it takes to distinguish between the real and the imaginary on a consistent basis and stand up to the arbitrary claims of religion, just as many non-believers do. But he lacks such courage and thus resents those who do.

As confirmation of this analysis, notice how often theists insist that there really are no atheists, that atheism is an impossible alternative to theism, and that, if anything, agnosticism is the rightful category of self-professing atheists. Many have misconstrued agnosticism as essentially equivalent to non-belief. But this is mistaken. Agnosticism is the view that certainty on a given matter is unachievable. It does not have to be in the context of theism, but in the context of theism agnosticism would be the view that no one can be sure whether or not a god exists. An agnostic can be a theist just as he could be an atheist; he could believe that there is a god, or he could disbelieve that there is a god. The agnostic is one who takes issue with a position of certainty on the matter. Such persons tend to be more inclined to succumbing to Pascal’s Wager than to acknowledging the imaginative nature of god-belief. Also, theists who have come to realize that their apologetic arguments intending to prove the existence of their god are faulty and consequently unpersuasive, are more inclined to object to an atheist’s certainty and insist that he’s really an agnostic on the subject.

Note also that the atheist is not someone who claims to have been “chosen” to be included in some group or another by an invisible magic being. A genuine atheist does not presume to be the recipient of favor distributed among men by some supernatural source; he typically understands that he needs to rely on his own wits in life, and seeks to develop them for that very purpose. Thus he values his own wits, and acts to protect them from subterfuge and deceit. Perhaps this is what the theist has in mind when he calls the atheist “arrogant.” The atheist is typically not the one who seeks to pass himself off as numbering among “the chosen” and preferring to characterize everyone else as numbering among “the damned.” Christianity, for instance, holds that there is no greater prize than “God’s grace,” and Christian believers style themselves as recipients of this prize and everyone else as lacking it. Given this aspect of god-belief, the charge of arrogance seems entirely misdirected when leveled against the atheist.

Smart insists that none of what I have presented above qualifies as an observation. But why? Does Smart explain himself? Does Smart provide a definition of what he means by “observation”? Does Smart consider the possibility that what he means by “observation” may be different from what I mean by “observation”? Does Smart produce an argument to support his insistent assertion?

The answer is a big “No!” to each of these questions.

I started off by stating my own suspicions about what motivates Christian behavior. Why can’t I observe my own suspicions? Smart does not say. My suspicions are based on firsthand encounters with Christians I’ve debated with. Why can’t I state what I’ve observed other Christians doing? Smart does not say. I stated that atheists are spoilsports to theists merely by existing qua atheists, a fact that I have observed. Why can’t this be an observation? Smart does not say. I’ve observed many theists reacting quite negatively to my certainty. Why can’t this be an observation? Smart does not say. I have observed many theists claiming that there really are no atheists at all. Why can’t this be an observation? Smart does not say. I noted that those persons who raise objections to a person’s certainty are more likely to endorse Pascal’s Wager than to consider the possibility that god-belief is based on imaginary inputs, a tendency which I have observed. Why can’t this qualify as an observation? Smart does not say. I pointed out that atheists typically do not claim to have been “chosen” to be part of some group by an invisible magic being. I have observed this. Why can’t this be an observation? Smart does not say. I noted that “a genuine atheist does not presume to be the recipient of favor distributed among men by some supernatural force.” I have observed this. Why can’t this be an observation? Smart does not say. I noted that atheists do not typically try to pass themselves off as numbering among “the chosen.” I have observed this. Why can’t this be an observation? Smart does not say. I’ve observed that “Christianity... holds that there is no greater prize than ‘God’s grace’” and that “Christians styles themselves as recipients of this prize and everyone else as lacking it.” Why can’t this be an observation? Smart does not say.

Smart asserts that what I offered instead of observations was nothing other than “a long series of vituperative assertions about the motivations and feelings of the theist, informed by nothing but [my] own prejudices.” But how does Smart know this? Does Smart not know that I have interacted with hundreds of theists, each instance enlarging my awareness of what theists say and do? Does Smart not know that I have had hundreds of acquaintances who profess Christianity as their worldview, each providing inputs to my knowledge of what Christians say and do? Does Smart not

know that I myself was once a professing Christian, years ago back in my misguided youth, unaware of rational philosophy, a firsthand experience as a Christian providing ample inputs on what Christians say and do? Does Smart distinguish between “prejudices” and evidence? If so, is he immune to his own prejudices in evaluating what atheists say and do? Smart is the one who is accusing atheists of arrogance, not I. Is he not saying that, in his experience (as opposed to merely what his “prejudices” tell him) that there are atheists who expect Christians to observe their own “presuppositions and criteria” in defending their faith beliefs?

Smart seems to be the perfect useful idiot, a person who willfully falls on the very sword he uses to slash at others, however ineffectually.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: ["Arrogance"](#), [Christian Psychopathy](#)

posted by Bahnsen Burner at [10:00 AM](#)

## 8 Comments:

[Justin Hall](#) said...

Google translate is good for translating between Indo-European languages, however for Chinese to English, uh not so good. I dont think the poster above meant to say "Where the scars! I'm sorry you do not shout!".

[June 19, 2010 8:50 PM](#)

[openlyatheist](#) said...

Mr. Smart is a projectionist of the highest order. His repetitive preoccupation with the "arrogance" of atheism is part of an approach that seems to dominate the tactics of presuppositionalist apologists; namely, accusing their opponents of a crime just before attempting to pull off that crime themselves.

If one reads this blog, I think they'd notice an abundance of material on the role of perception in the process of concept formation. Perception is not far removed from "observation." In fact, I think Smart would be hard pressed to find any sentence published on this blog that is not related in some way to observation.

But Smart also seems preoccupied with discouraging others from reading in general. Imagine the outrage from presups if I hosted a blog dedicated to critiquing their apologetics while simultaneously declaring their books too "laborious" to read.

Accusations of verbosity, followed by demands for "succinct perspicuity?" What bullshit.

[June 20, 2010 12:57 AM](#)

[Justin Hall](#) said...

The arrogance of a group that claims persecution when their attempts to persecute are thwarted, leaves me without words to describe the degree of their arrogance.

[June 20, 2010 8:01 AM](#)

[Jay](#) said...

When you were a professing Christian, were you involved with presuppositionalism?

[June 20, 2010 1:26 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Thanks for your comments, everyone.

Jay, I devoted a whole blog entry to your question. You can find it here:

[Was I Ever a Presuppositionalist Myself?](#)

Regards,  
Dawson

[June 22, 2010 10:02 AM](#)

[Tavarish](#) said...

I'm glad I got a mention. I'm Tavarish, I also have a blog entitled the Usual Rhetoric. I've been in contact with David Smart, or Ryft, or Arcanus (depending on where you see him) many times in the past. We've always gotten down to one question that he will not answer, or at least, has not answered in my presence. That question is also the same question I asked of him in the comments section of his 'arrogance' diatribe - twice.

The question obviously being "How do you distinguish fact from fantasy?"

As a personal aside, I find presuppositionalists arrogant, not in their certainty, but their approach and arguing tactics.

I'll write a few things on my blog about it, since a few things you've brought up are noteworthy and bear repeating.

Thanks,  
-Freddy

[June 24, 2010 9:48 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

I suppose Smart will never attempt a response to my points, but I'd really like to see how he might defend the view that something is imaginary "only by the presuppositions and criteria [one] employs." If something is imaginary, what do "presuppositions and criteria" which one "employs" have to do with anything?

And yes, I see that Smart has not addressed Tavarish's question, which he has asked twice now, and which Smart has acknowledged.

What's keeping David Smart from addressing these matters? They speak right to the level of presuppositions, do they not? Surely he has answers, doesn't he?

What's the hold-up here?

Regards,  
Dawson

[June 28, 2010 10:12 AM](#)